DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 626 RC 022 386

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TITLE	The Neglected Workforce.
INSTITUTION	First Nations Development Inst., Fredericksburg, VA.
PUB DATE	1999-11-00
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	First Nations Development Institute, Stores Building, 11917 Main St., Fredericksburg, VA 22408 ($12.00/year; back issues $3 each). For full text: http://www.firstnations.org/publications/NovDecBa.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Business Alert; v14 n6 p8-10 Nov-Dec 1999
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*American Indian Education; *Computer Science Education; Cultural Influences; Geographic Isolation; Higher Education; *Information Technology; Internet; *Reservation American Indians; Rural Education; *Tribally Controlled Education; *Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	Access to Technology; *Native Americans

ABSTRACT

Despite a 4 percent U.S. unemployment rate, Native American tribes suffer unemployment rates of around 50 percent. Meanwhile, information technology managers increasingly hire more foreign workers under H-1B visas. Obstacles to Native American participation in the information technology job market are a lack of technology infrastructure at tribal colleges and on reservations, the tribal system of government that fosters dependency and limits free enterprise, technology anxieties resulting from a culture based on physical contact with the earth, and public stereotyping and the media's portrayal of Native Americans as shiftless alcoholics. Tribal colleges are encouraging young people to become interested in technology, which they believe can make a huge difference in reservation economies. Grants from educational and philanthropic organizations are providing distance learning courses and developing the technology infrastructure necessary for tribal colleges and Native Americans on reservations to take advantage of geographically-independent information technology jobs. Companies and universities are offering internships and scholarships to training programs such as the University of California's Summer Institute in Computer Science. Several anecdotes describe Native Americans who have found successful jobs through information technology. (TD)

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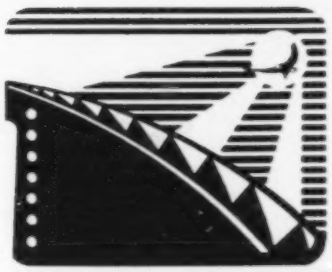

FIRST NATIONS DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

BUSINESS ALERT

VOL. 14, NO. 6 NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1999

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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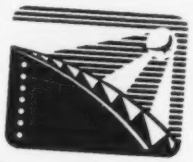

BUSINESS ALERT

Editor
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Design/Production
PC Design Services

BUSINESS ALERT is published every other month by First Nations Development Institute. The Stores Building, 11917 Main Street, Fredericksburg, VA 22408 (540/371-5615).

The ALERT features policy, legislation, First Nations program and site activities, and information on economic and financial activities affecting Indian tribes and individuals. Yearly subscriptions are available for $12.

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The ALERT is distributed to all tribes and inter-tribal councils and is mailed to Indian businesses, organizations and individuals.

First Nations participates in the Combined Federal Campaign (#11623) and America's Charities Workplace Giving Federation.

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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The neglected workforce

Despite a 4% U.S. unemployment rate, most Native Americans can't get work. Meanwhile, Information Technology managers increasingly hire more foreign workers under H-1B visas. New initiatives hope to change this picture by bringing technology and training to the reservations.

By Bronwyn Fryer
Computerworld
www.computerworld.com

Rae Peppers has her hands very full. As director of the Tribal Business Information Technology Center at the Dull Knife Memorial Tribal College on the Cheyenne reservation near Billings, Mont., she is single-handedly building a 100-client Windows NT network. She's also installing a T1 line and setting up a 7,000-record tribal enrollment database. Unemployed, she isn't.

By contrast, too many of the estimated 2.4 million American Indians have no work at all – a shameful situation given that the overall U.S. unemployment rate remains at a historic low of 4%.

In technology-related fields, Information Technology managers are so desperate for workers that Congress this year passed a special bill providing special H-1B visas to foreign workers with IT skills. But despite the robust economy, many Native American tribes suffer unemployment rates of a staggering 50%, some even higher.

This dire scenario has spurred Native American leaders, academics and philanthropy organizations to focus on two-year tribal colleges like Dull Knife, which they believe can make a huge difference in reservation economies. Under a recent grant from the National Science Foundation, tribal colleges are being outfitted with advanced IT that will allow members to take distance-learning classes.

Meanwhile, the colleges' computer science courses are encouraging young people to become interested in technology. "We're trying to jump a generation of technology to train a generation of young American Indian people in the field," says Tom Davis, president of Lac Courte Orielles Ojibwa Community College in Hayward, Wis., and spokesman for the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

Davis says he hopes the new initiatives will "provide a steady stream of highly skilled employees that fill the need for workers while closing the digital divide between technology's haves and have-nots."

People of the (remote) land

Tribe members and others who work closely with them cite a number of reasons why Native Americans haven't yet benefited from the explosion of the information economy. Primary among these is geography: many reservations are in remote areas far from major urban areas.

"My mother is from Juneau," says Alaskan Tlingit tribe member Mark Trebian, who today works as an asynchronous network designer at Lac Courte Oreilles tribal college. "There's no real infrastructure up there. Communication is all phone-based, and it's spotty at that."

James Laducer, a Chippewa tribe member who runs one of the very few privately owned American Indian companies in the U.S., blames the 200-year-old tribal system of government that "fosters dependency and limits free enterprise."

An estimated 38% of the highly skilled employees at Laducer and Associates, an IT services firm near Bismarck, N. D., are Native American. Laducer says all his employees have an extremely high work ethic but that the reservation system from which they come discourages enterprise. "It's no different than coming from a social-

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ist country like Cuba," he says with some bitterness.

The protective, insular culture of reservation life has also discouraged tribe members from investigating technology. "A lot of our people don't want to leave home, and they're frightened of technology," says Rae Peppers.

Indeed, technology is anathema to a people whose traditions and culture depend on physical contact with the earth and other people, observes Victor Chavez, who heads up Sandia National Laboratories' small-business empowerment programs from his office in Albuquerque, N. M. Chavez is working with local Navajo and Laguna Pueblo tribes to bring technology onto the reservations.

"When the key to the culture is its roots in Mother Earth, the virtual world – using e-mail to talk to someone in Japan or selling a handwoven blanket on the Internet – is a difficult concept to grasp," Chavez says.

A far larger problem is public stereotyping and the media's portrayal of Native Americans as shiftless alcoholics, argues Leubomir Bic, a professor of information and computer science at the University of California, Irvine, who heads up the Summer Institute in Computer Science (SICS) for students from tribal colleges. "The messages the media sends are mostly negative," says Bic. "When I first visited reservations, I was pleasantly surprised to find well-run colleges and motivated students and teachers who knew what they were doing."

But corporate recruiters generally overlook these colleges as a possible source for new blood. Most companies do recruiting at the same handpicked group of four-year colleges and universities year after year. But according to UCI's SICS web site, less than 0.5% of Native Americans enroll in four-year colleges, and 50% of those students drop out within the first year.

Thus, because IT hiring managers are bent on finding people with the proper skills and degrees, Native American IT workers are still a rare find. "I was recruited into Xerox from a college where they traditionally recruited because I happened to have the skills they needed," says Kevin Hill, Y2K program manager at Xerox Corporation and a member of the Cherokee nation.

Opportunity ahead

Despite these daunting issues, young people with access to computers and an interest in technology can enjoy stunning success. Example: 25-year-old Darrell Begay, who grew up on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico and spent his youth herding cattle. Begay had never touched a computer until he went to a tribal college. "That's when I took my first computer class, and I've never looked back since," he says.

Subsequently, Begay was able to come up with the $2,700 he needed to enroll in the SICS program. Today, he is among the 50% of program participants to pursue a degree in computer science. A senior and a C++ [a programming language] wizard, he's working at a start-up called NexTake Corp. in Newport Beach, Calif. "My family is ecstatic that I'm a productive member of society and that I'm a model for my nephews and nieces," he says. "I only wish I'd learned about computers at their age."

American Indians who haven't grown up on reservations say they have less difficulty in getting an education and acclimating to the broader business culture of the U.S. Dan Wall, a Potawatomi tribe member who works as a software process improvement manager at Xerox, grew up in New York state. He has visited the tribe's reservation in Oklahoma only once. This distancing, he says, has played a part in his attitude. "I've always felt that the opportunity is there for anyone with the education and the skills."

Mark Hunter, a 26-year-old Choctaw working as an e-business specialist in the IT organization at IBM in Dallas, grew up in San Antonio. A keen interest in engineering and good grades in school allowed him to graduate from Dartmouth College, where Hunter belonged to a small group of Native American students.

Today, Hunter is helping IBM "expand the pond for qualified Native Americans with the right skills," he says. To this end, IBM sponsors high school students with internships, scholarships and tutoring, and supports programs like SICS.

Today, educational and philanthropic organizations are looking harder at reservations and just starting to make inroads. In addition to SICS and AIHEC, others are working on bringing technology and training to a population that has been largely overlooked.

The key to economic recovery and self-sufficiency, they say, is the Internet. By bringing the Net to tribal colleges and, if possible, to homes on the reservation, Native Americans who want to stay there will gain an economic and educational tool they've never had before.

Microsoft Corp. and The Gates Foundation, for example, are focusing on Native Americans for basically the same reason, says Chris Jones, who oversees Microsoft's educational philanthropy efforts. Recently, Microsoft donated $75,000 to three tribal colleges – Salish Kootenai College in Montana, Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas, and Northwest Indian College in Washington – to help them build infrastructure and provide Windows NT training for their IT staff.

"As people gain more skills, they can start to engage in even more lucrative jobs: webmasters, network administrators, computer technicians, database designers, telecommunications specialists, and so on," says Jones. "Many of these jobs are geographically independent, a real advantage for Indian people."

Jones adds that once they have these skills, Native Americans who choose to move off the reservation "are pretty valuable no matter where they choose to settle."

"On the scale of access to technology and the benefits technology brings to people, American Indians are off the bottom end of the chart," says Jones. "They are by far the most disadvantaged group in our country. And yet, technology offers a somewhat unique opportunity for them to make huge advances."

Taken together, these efforts to bring distance learning to reservations and train young Native Americans for jobs in IT will pay off enormously. In fact, it's difficult to imagine a better investment than building a technology infrastructure.

"It all comes down to resources," says Begay. "Every time I go back to the reservation, I try to do something to help this once proud nation. We're a resilient people. The potential is there."

"Right now, people who are working to bring technology to the reservation are the trailblazers," adds Hunter. "We're realizing we can work and give back to the reservation, too."

Fryer is a freelance writer in Santa Cruz, Calif.

How You Can Help

Support tribal colleges. All 33 of the tribal colleges in the U.S. welcome donations of cash, training, technical support and software to help improve their infrastructure.

Sponsor a youngster. By donating money to educational outreach programs such as University of California at Irvine's Summer Institute in Computer Science, you can help a poor student attend computer science courses.

Support the American Indian Science and Engineering Society. The group provides opportunities for Native Americans to pursue studies in science, engineering, business and other academic arenas. An excellent recruitment source.

For more information, check out the Native American Distance Education Community's Web site at www.arc.unm.edu/Alliance/Community.